

Charles Simonds

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Charles Simonds

Exhibition organized and text written by
John Beardsley, Adjunct Curator

Charles Simonds's work has always implied a critique of architecture. Although the artist's miniature clay landscapes and dwellings, a number of which are included in this exhibition, are known for their fantastical quality, it has always seemed to me that these small constructions have much to teach us through comparison with our actual architecture. For the first time now, however, Simonds is taking on architecture directly, by creating a full-scale human space, one that is fundamentally different from those to which we have become accustomed. This exhibition presents an architectural environment titled *Refuge*, a circular chamber twelve feet high and twenty-two feet in diameter that is at once a prototype for a piece to be permanently installed in Korea, and a hypothetical first room of a house the artist hopes one day to build. Simonds's shift in scale is a bold venture on two counts. His criticism of conventional architecture is now more explicit and thus more open to scrutiny. At the same time, Simonds is leaving behind the safety of fantasy for the exigencies of the real world.

At the heart of his critique is the notion that most architecture has long since and too easily given up any connection with nature, or at least with natural events and processes. This is not a matter of a single architectural style or even period: Frank Lloyd Wright's "Falling Water" and Jefferson's original plan for the University of Virginia, as different as they are, can both be described as architecture that interacts with nature in the sense of particular landscapes. It is more a function of evolution. Until very recently, it has seemed inevitable and right that we should evolve toward a more organized, more urbanized life. Simonds makes the obvious point that the more developed the environment, the less it is of the earth. But he does more: he proposes a virtual recreation of architecture by starting again at its beginning. He is taking the basic elements of architecture—wall, floor, door—and applying them to their most basic function, enclosure. Guiding him is a conviction that one can and should build by natural analogy.

Inasmuch as Simonds has a prototype for his architecture, it is in prehistory, when the earth itself, its caves and crevices, was a dwelling. Simple structures built into cliffs—by the Indians of the American Southwest, for example—provided the models for the earliest of Simonds's creations. These were landscapes with rudimentary buildings and ceremonial spaces made of unfired clay, often set into the walls or on window ledges of buildings in lower Manhattan where the artist lives. Their formal vocabulary was simple: tiny bricks were stacked to make predominantly rectangular dwellings that were grouped into linear, circular, and occasionally spiral configurations. These works were intended to be impermanent—their life spans were determined by weather or vandalism. They constituted a kind of rear-guard action against the prevailing forms of urban architecture, serving to make the viewer, who often stumbled on them accidentally, recollect a different way of inhabiting the earth.

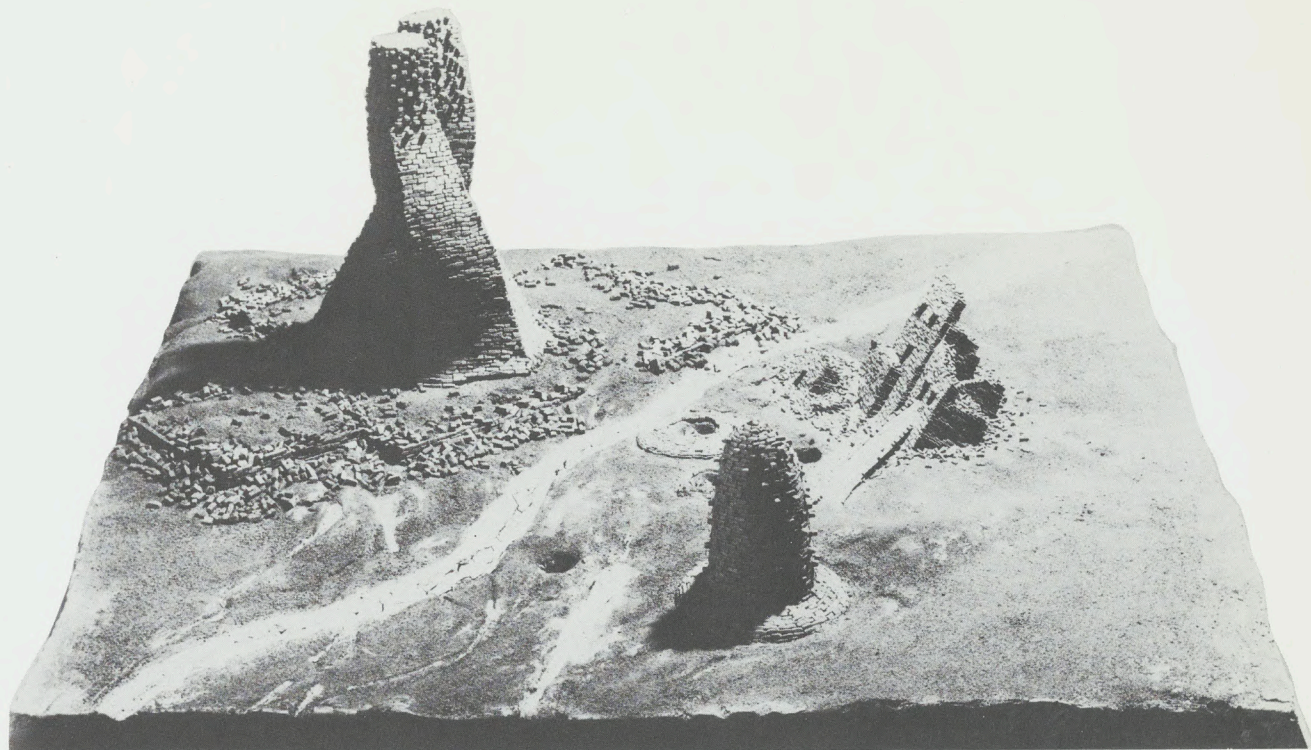
Wherever Simonds went, he took with him his bag of bricks and his fantasy. It was not long before his landscapes and dwellings began to appear on the streets of Genoa, Paris and Berlin, and even Shanghai. Nor was it long before the art world began to take notice of him. Soon he received invitations to work in galleries, museums, and private homes. Some of the resulting installations were temporary, others permanent. Among the former were projects at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1976); the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (1977); and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1978). Permanent installations in private homes were followed by a number in museums, as at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and the Kunsthhaus Zurich, both in 1981. Wherever possible, these involved some permanent alteration of the architectural space in which they were placed. Many of these pieces were, in fact, built into holes Simonds cut in the wall. All, however, were opportunities for Simonds to expand his own architectural vocabulary, which grew to encompass triangular, conical, and various polygonal shapes.

It was in the course of preparing for a travelling exhibition that opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, in 1981, that Simonds began to build consistently in a way that was suggestive of botanical and anatomical forms. His buildings began to look like sprouting plants. Breast-like, phallic, and vaginal shapes appeared in his landscapes, crude allusions to the generative power of the earth, to the idea that earth itself is a living organism. This idea received more subtle and profound expression in the culminating work of the exhibition tour: *Age*, installed temporarily at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in the autumn of 1983.

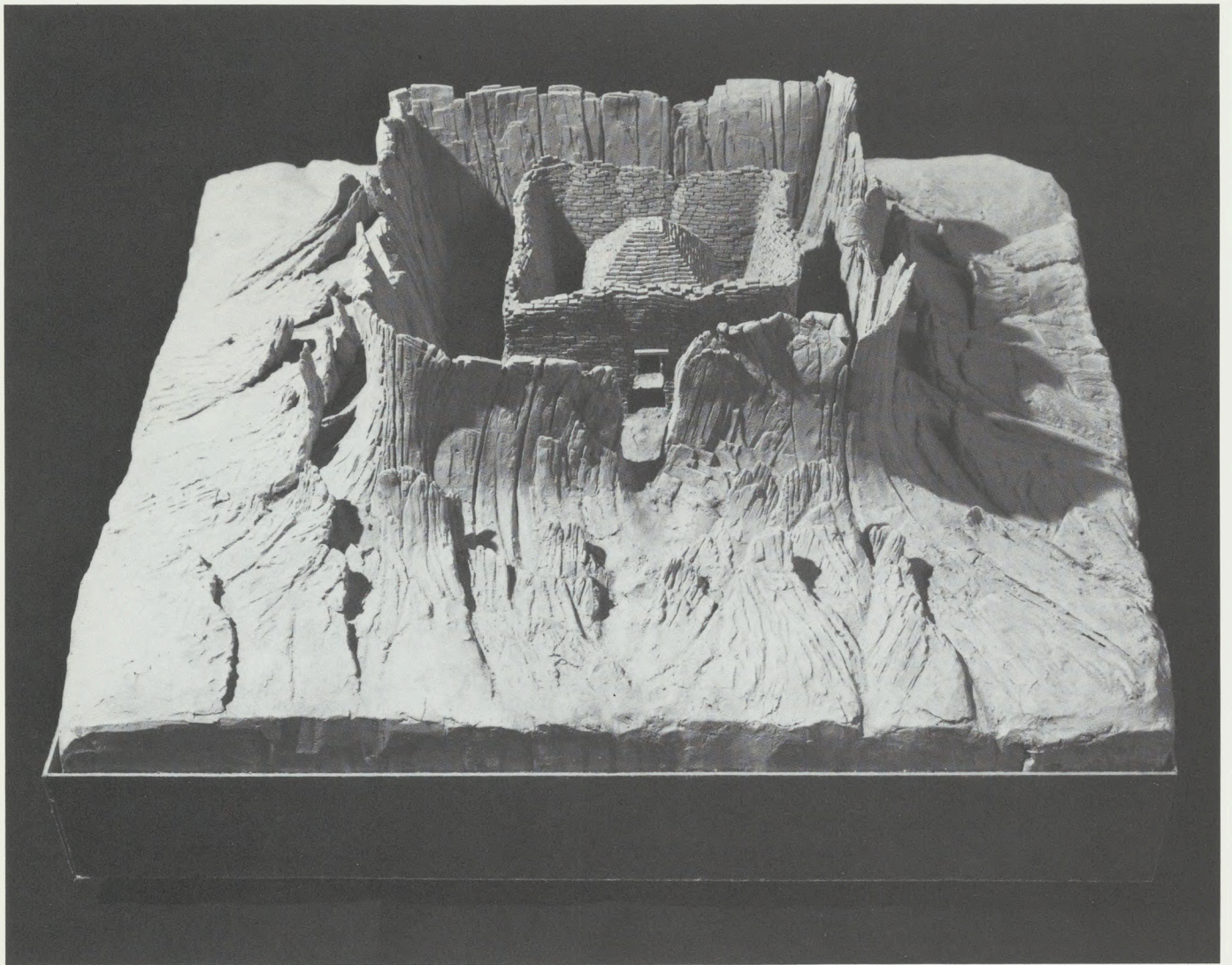
Some twenty-six feet in diameter and ten feet high, *Age* was a vast, spiralling landscape of clay rocks and brick. Near the top, dwellings at every angle seemed extruded from the rock or released from a volcano. Farther down, buildings crumbled into ruin. Here, architecture was like the creation and erosion of earth itself. *Age* testified to Simonds's widening awareness of the natural events and processes that could form the basis for an architecture by analogy.

Thereafter, Simonds's dwellings were not only places for living, but also living places: houses that sprouted like seeds, blossomed and wilted like flowers, twisted like grasses in the wind, burst like seed pods, or melted like ice. Distortion and illusion were central to these works, and represented a step beyond the adherence to structural logic that typified the artist's earlier dwellings. This tendency toward elaboration in Simonds's work is not merely something inherent in the life of form itself. Rather, it signifies the importance to the artist of the ever deeper connections he perceives between the morphology of landscape, the body, plants, and architecture.

A piece such as *Red Flow*, for example, reveals the many levels on which analogies can be perceived even within a single piece. Its three elements can be read individually: one a small, sprouting tumulus; another a pair of intertwined vine-like towers, the third a complex of buildings sinking into the ground. They can also be read collectively as a single essay on the seemingly organic growth and decay of architecture. Even the title can be interpreted literally as the dried channel of red clay slip that diagonally bisects the work, or figuratively as the water/blood that animates the earth.



Red Flow, 1984
clay and wood, 11 x 30 x 30"
Frances Beatty-Adler



Rock Flower, 1986
clay and wood, 12 x 24 3/16 x 24 3/16"
Collection of the artist

Analogies between earth, architecture, and biology are equally complex in *Rock Flower*. The dwelling takes its shape from the surrounding rocks, but both, as the title suggests, resemble the opening petals of a flower. As with all of Simonds's sculptures, there is a rich and suggestive use of color in these works. The artist exploits all the colors of clay—red, gray, and yellow especially. Red and gray are used interchangeably in architecture; in landscape, however, gray is generally used for rocks while red is employed to depict more organic landscape features.

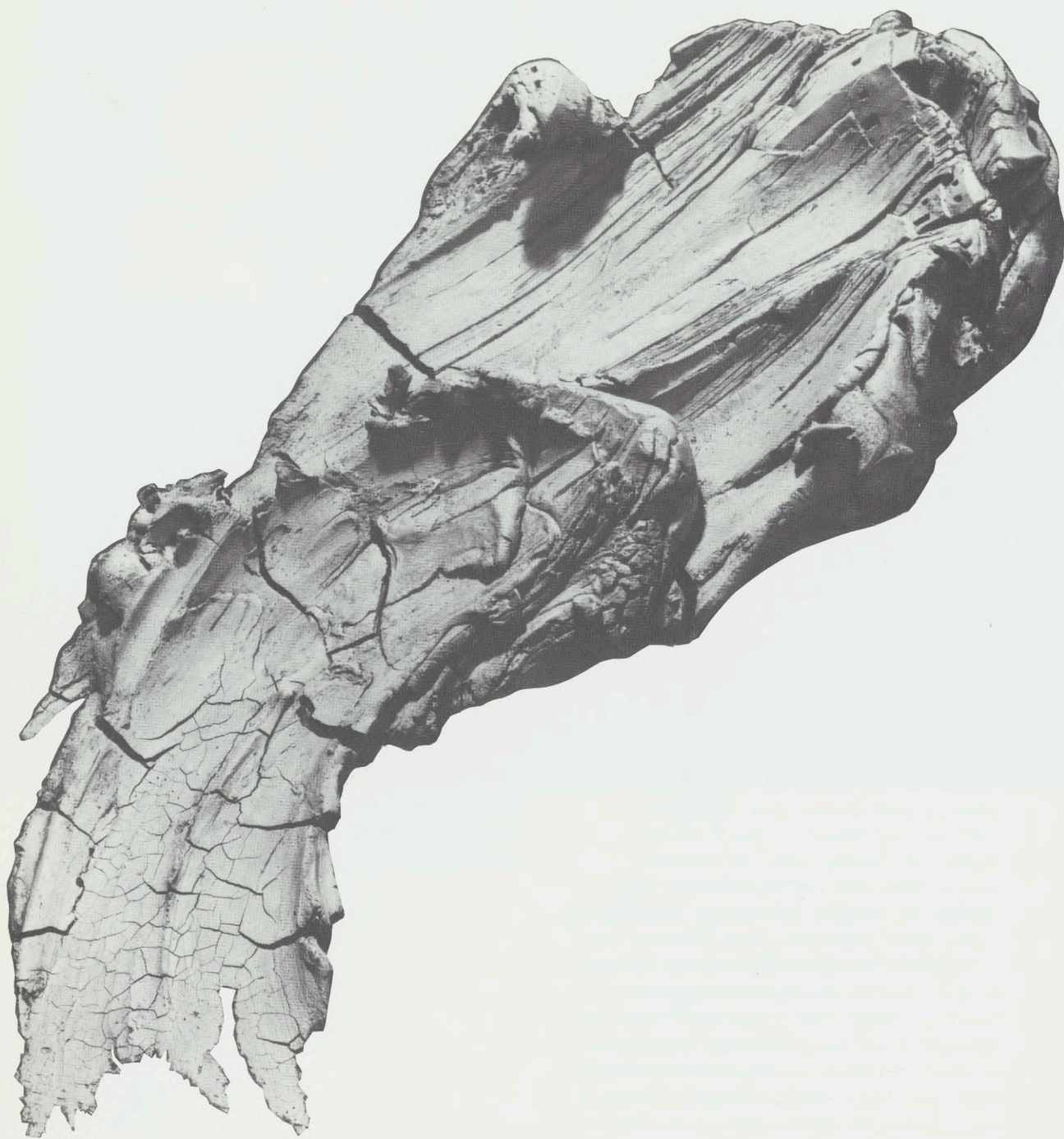
With *Smear I* (1984), Simonds reintroduced the idea of the human creative act as the generating impulse for architecture. Yet it was the most basic, instinctual, even infantile act—smearing—that he used as his point of departure. It is therefore not far removed from the natural events and processes that have long inspired his work. There is a minimal sense of will to the smear. “You’re more a witness to the fact of the material,” Simonds explains. “You’re letting the material tell its own story.” In the case of *Smear I*, gestural lines metamorphose into rocks, which in turn give rise to and contain rudimentary buildings.

The smear has been incorporated into a number of wall pieces as well. Again, these are not simply *on* the wall, but *in* it. Simonds excavates a space and pushes the smear into it, and then builds rocks and architecture back out again. These works thus exist at cross purposes to their architectural context, as if there was some hidden force or life within the wall that is being revealed. One such piece, *Dwelling* (1985), actually pierces a wall and comes out the other side: its compressed, spiralling form seems to detonate the surrounding architecture.

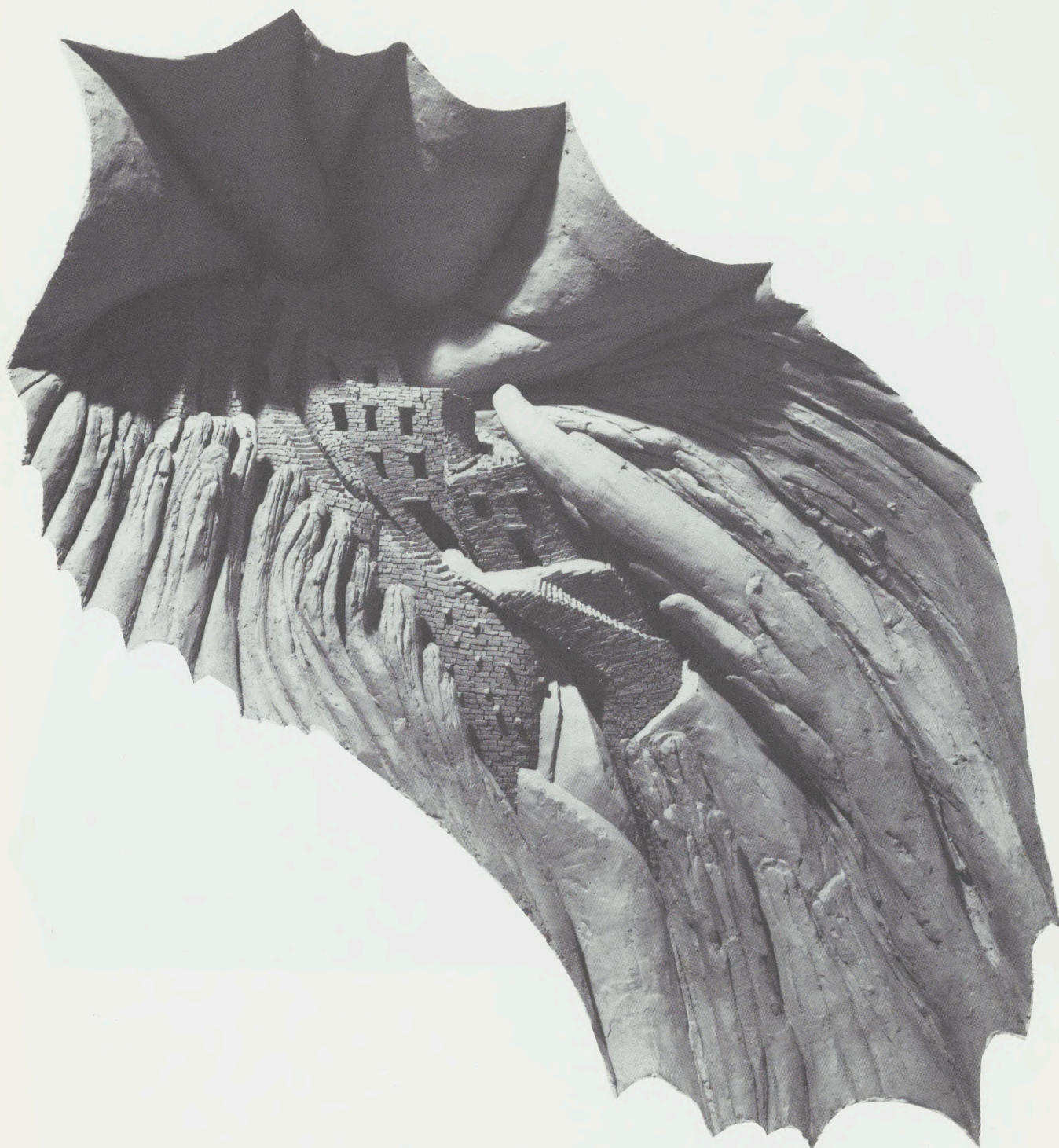
Having thus invented an elaborate visionary architecture based on the notion of analogy with the natural world, Simonds has increasingly felt drawn to the idea of working at human scale. For a gallery in Paris last year, he created a full-scale brick wall and a fired clay floor that anticipate his present work on *Refuge*. When he was invited to create a piece for permanent installation outdoors in Seoul on the occasion of the 1988 Summer Olympic Games, he saw it as a chance to follow through on his ambition to build a full-scale architectural space. As revealed by the model, the piece will consist of three principal elements: a circular chamber set into the earth and open to the sky; a spiral hill

built of bricks and ascended by stairs; and a fragment of a cyclopean stone wall that seems a relic of an earlier structure. Adjacent to these elements is one of the artist’s signature ritual places, a place where the generative power of earth is celebrated: a group of posts surrounds low mounds that are suggestive of breasts and bellies. The piece will combine positive and negative—concave and convex—forms, open and enclosed spaces, and a sense of past and present in the juxtaposition of finished and fragmentary structures.

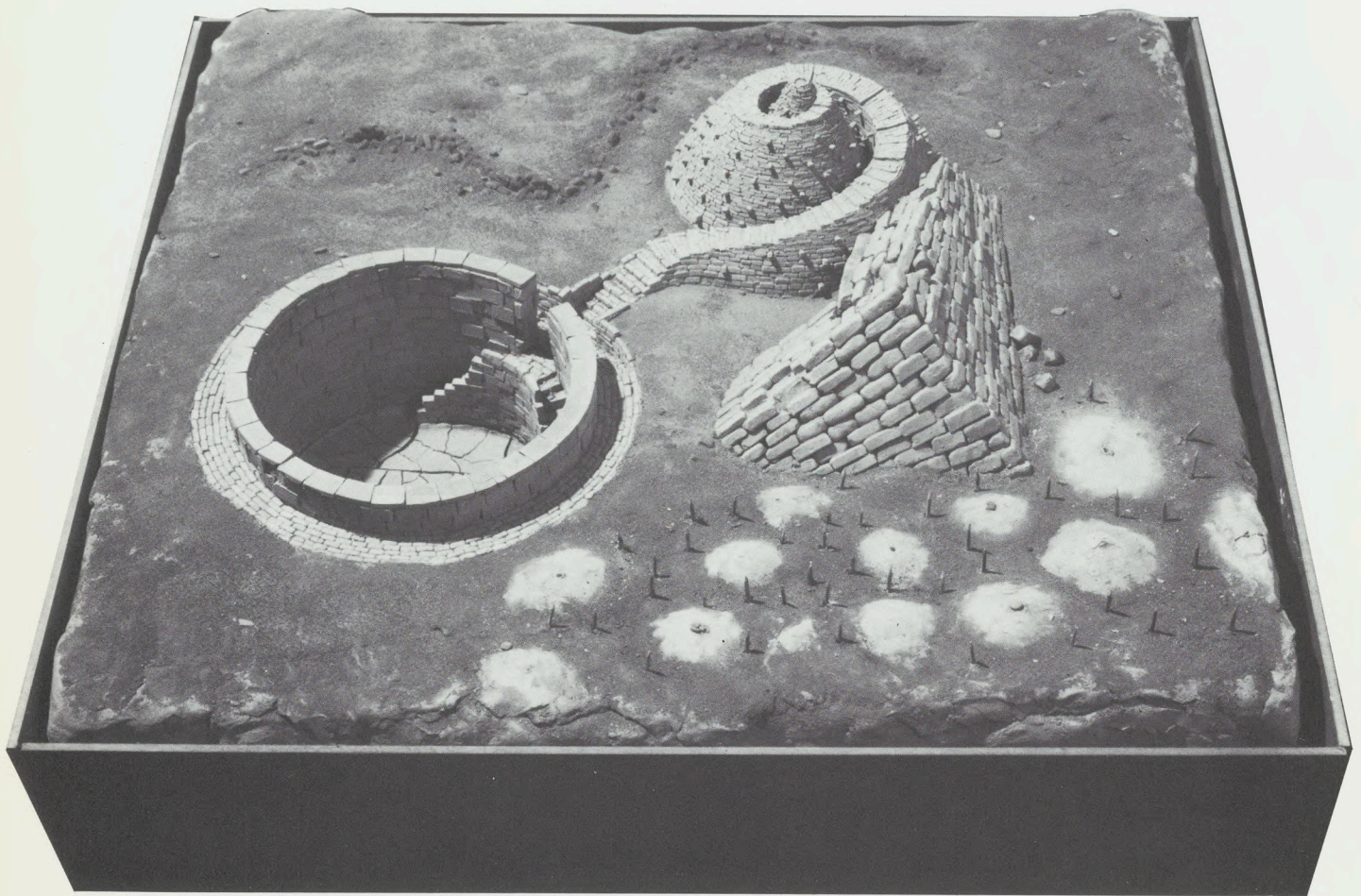
It is a prototype for a part of the Korean project—the circular chamber (minus the steps)—that is being exhibited here. The chamber wall is made of bricks, but not the artist’s usual clay ones, as the finished piece is intended for the outdoors. These are of concrete poured into molds made from a clay original and painted with colored clay slip. The lower six feet was cast in curved sections in the artist’s studio, transported to the Corcoran, bolted together, and the joints sealed. The upper six feet was built on site with blocks made in the studio. The floor is made of poured and fired clay. The whole chamber is entered by an arched passageway nine feet long and three feet wide, which creates a sense of transition or separation similar to that which will be produced by descending into the chamber when it is set permanently into the ground.



Smear I, 1984
clay and wood, 3 x 22 5/8 x 22 5/8"
Castelli Feigen Corcoran, New York



Dwelling, 1985
clay, plaster, and wood, 34 x 31 x 16 1/4"
Collection of Richard Ekstrat



Refuge (model), 1988
clay and wood, 10 x 28 1/4 x 28 1/4"
Collection of the artist

As much as possible, Simonds has tried to design this space in accordance with his notion of architecture by analogy. The issue for him, he explains, is "how to keep the natural part in the architecture, how to make a natural event *become* architecture." The connection with natural events is most apparent with the floor. It was allowed to dry and crack in accordance with its own character before being fired, thereby preserving "the memory of a natural moment," as Simonds puts it. But the wall, too, suggests a natural process. The smallest bricks are in the lower courses of the wall; they get consistently larger toward the top. This reverses the arrangement of conventional architecture, in which the lower section of a building is usually made to look heavier and more substantial than the upper. But the intent here is not only to reverse expectations, or to confound the illusions of perspective. There is sense of compression in this wall that is instinctively correct, as if the lower courses were being compacted by the upper ones—like geological strata.

Although this particular chamber was designed with the Korean Olympics commission in mind, Simonds has no doubt that it—or one very much like it—will surface again in another context. He describes this room as one of several "thoughts toward houses" that have lately been preoccupying him. His hope is eventually to build a whole house, or a series of houses, in accordance with his own developing ideas on architecture. He admits to being "happily naive," and acknowledges that his notions may crumble when applied to real building. Moreover, he knows that there is something almost impossibly quixotic about what he is doing—starting architecture over again from the beginning, as if one could, this far along, wipe the slate clean. Yet he is convinced that this is essential to his purpose. To his mind, a house "should make you understand nature:" it is a place, perhaps the primary place, that mediates between the body and the earth, that makes one at home in the other. A house should be "a place that reinforces belief, clear of incidental nonsense." Thus the circular, roofless chamber could become the central court or anteroom of a house, a place for becoming aware of the sun and the moon and the passage of time, a place assertively on earth under sky. It could be the central moment in a series of the architectural episodes that recall the abiding if almost forgotten connections between ourselves and nature.

Biography

Charles Simonds was born in New York in 1945. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of California at Berkeley in 1967 and a Masters of Fine Arts degree from Rutgers University in 1969. He lives and works in New York.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Paris, and tour to Samangallery, Genoa (1975-76).

Museum of Modern Art, New York (1976).

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (1977).

Westfälischer Kunstverein, Munster, and tour to Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn (1978).

Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Museum Ludwig, Cologne; and tour to Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Musee de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix, Les Sables-d'Olonne, France; and Galerie Baudoin Lebon, Paris (1979).

Beaumont-May Gallery, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire. (1980).

California State University at Los Angeles (1980).

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and tour to Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Fort Worth Art Museum; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston; Phoenix Museum of Art; Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, Memphis; and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1981-83).

Leo Castelli Gallery, New York (1984).

Architekturmuseum, Basel (1985).

Galerie Baudoin Lebon, Paris (1987).

Works in the exhibition

Red Flow, 1984
clay and wood, 11 x 30 x 30''
Frances Beatty-Adler

Smear I, 1984
clay and wood, 3 x 22 5/8 x 22 5/8''
Castelli Feigen Corcoran, New York

Basel Smear I, 1984
clay and wood, 31 x 31 x 9''
Collection of the artist

Basel Smear II, 1984
clay and wood, 33 x 33 x 9''
Collection of the artist

Dwelling, 1985
clay, plaster, and wood, 34 x 31 x 16 1/4''
Collection of Richard Ekstract

Rock Flower, 1986
clay and wood, 12 x 24 3/16 x 24 3/16''
Collection of the artist

Cliff Smear, 1987
clay, plaster, and wood, 24 x 16 x 18''
Castelli Feigen Corcoran, New York

Rocks, 1987
clay and wood, 34 x 21 x 15''
Collection of the artist

Refuge (model), 1988
clay and wood, 10 x 28 1/4 x 28 1/4''
Collection of the artist

Refuge, 1988
concrete, wood, and clay, 12' high x 22' diameter
Collection of the artist

Acknowledgment

The artist wishes to express his gratitude to Chestertown Brick for assistance in producing the floor for *Refuge*.

Related Events

Art Talk

Charles Simonds

In this special **ART TALK** Simonds will show not only slides of his works in progress but films documenting the transformation of the artist *himself* with clay.

Thursday, May 19, 6:00 p.m. in the Frances and Armand Hamer Auditorium. Admission is free.